Funny thing about us humans -- or at least us humans in North America – we do seem to want a lot of things. Most of the time the wanting isn’t for things that we really need. The more we have the more we seem to want. We see something new in a store and our desire for it grows until we can’t stand it and buy whatever it is even though we don’t need it. Or we want it because our neighbor has it and we want what our neighbor has.

The French author Alexis de Tocqueville observed this as early as 1831 while traveling through the "new world" of America: "I have seen the freest and best educated of men in the happiest circumstances the world can afford; yet it seemed that a cloud hung on their brow and they appeared serious and almost sad [...] because they never stopped thinking of the good things they have not yet got."

We are a lot like the first laborers hired. We are happy with what we have until we see something else. We’re happy with what we’re given until we compare what we’re given with that of others. Then, we become dissatisfied and unhappy.

Compare this attitude with that of children in a village in Africa. A visiting anthropologist prepared a gift basket of delicious fruit and wrapped it with a ribbon. He put the basket under a tree, then gathered up the children in the village. Several feet away from the basket, he drew a line in the dirt. He told the children that when he counted to three, they should run to the fruit and whoever got there first would win the basket. When he counted to three, the children all joined hands and ran together to the basket, sat down in circle and all began enjoying the fruit. The anthropologist was shocked and asked about this and one girl replied, “How can one of us be happy when the rest of us are sad.” That’s the concept of ubunto (oo-BOON-to), which means “I am because we are.”[[1]](#endnote-1) Happiness is derived through the happiness of others – through unity. Happiness does not come through acquiring more and more things, especially if acquiring these things comes at the expense of our relationship with others.

The theme that runs through the Old Testament, Epistle and New Testament this week is the call to be content with what we’ve been given. Being content means not complaining and whining, not being envious, and not placing the need to get more for ourselves above the need to lift up each other. It means not always seeking more, but rather living joyfully and gratefully. It means loving instead of longing. It means sharing.

This lifestyle is difficult, especially since it is countercultural to the lifestyle of consumerism. Yet Christianity, when truly lived, has always been countercultural. The idea of trying to live as Jesus did – the idea of being grateful in all things – has always been ountercultural. Yet they are all part of what we must do to be content with what we have and to not compete with or be envious of our neighbors. They are what we must do not to fall out of our Christian calling and into the culture trap.

Another part of Christian living is understanding that God meets our needs – not our wants – but our needs. For example, when the Israelites wanted food, God didn’t give them ice cream, or chocolate cake, or prime rib. He didn’t provide a varying diet. Instead, God gave them manna, with occasional quail, every single day. Manna wasn’t delectable to look at. If manna were available today, we we probably wouldn’t rush out to buy it. But yet it was nutritionally complete. It was exactly what the Israelites needed. God also provided what was needed in such a way that no one competed with anyone else to find it or hoard it. If you took more than you could eat in a day, the manna turned rancid overnight.

God meets our needs, too, but God may not necessarily provide our wants. We need a roof over our heads, nutritional food, and clothing. We don’t need a mansion, fine delicacies and designer labels. Sometimes if we keep acquiring and hoarding beyond our needs, we wake up and realize that what once glittered seems, like the manna, to have turned rancid and hollow. Rather than hoarding, we are called to share. In sharing, we become more grateful.

Toby Ord is an Australian who realized that with the amount of money he would potentially earn in his lifetime he could cure 80,000 people of blindness in a Third World country and still have enough for an adequate life. He decided to cap his annual income at about $35,000 a year, adjusted for inflation, and to give everything else away. So far, he has given away about $200,000 and expects to give away more than $1 million over his career. He also has founded Gifting What We Can in which members all over the world pledge to give 10 percent of their income to effective charities.

People like Toby realize that joy doesn’t come from being envious of what God has given your neighbor vs. what God has given you or from whining because we want something we don’t have. It doesn’t come from the continual acquisition of things. Instead joy comes from being content with less so that we can lift up our neighbors.

God wants us to have what we need. But God doesn’t want us to hoard or to whine or to envy. God calls us to strive together. God calls us to be sure everyone has enough.

1. # James Clear: How to Be Happy: A Surprising Lesson on Happiness From an African Tribe, https://jamesclear.com/how-can-i-be-happy-if-you-are-sad

   [↑](#endnote-ref-1)